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BEYOND THE HUMAN MASK

John Leonard, *Jesus in Kashmir*.
Proensa. ISBN 0 9581938 0 0.
\$19.95. 79 pp.

Ian C. Smith, *These Fugitive Days*.
Ginninderra Press. ISBN 1 74027 178 5.
105 pp.

Jesus in Kashmir by John Leonard and *These Fugitive Days* by Ian C Smith whilst providing very differing experiences for the reader take us to the same place, one beyond the grasp of words. They make us stretch to a place that intensifies the everyday life experiences that make us distinctly human. Both justify our instinct and our urge to read and create poetry. Leonard motivates us to establish a deeper consciousness of "our place in the scheme of things" through simple questioning of some of the profound issues of life. The following lines from various poems illustrate this simply but beautifully. From "Given Love":

Given love, what does this love
Entail? What stories surround it?
What bearings are there? What
Shall we say speaks?

And from "The Dumb Stone":

The Stone was discovered by the
highway
Where it had lain in full view
For many years. Those who discovered
it

Were struck by how perfectly it seemed
To embody everything a stone should.

And last, but certainly not least, from
"Butterflies on Dung":

Is it the moisture,
Or the nutriment,
That draws them to it
In close-packed swarms?

.....

One thing is clear —
No matter how dirty
Their feet, or mouthparts,
Their wings are spotless.

From the first poem to the last, John Leonard's book of poems investigates the rhythms of our very existence — the time we call "life," balancing on the edge of that profound discovery which has evaded civilizations through their religious beliefs and served as the inspiration of poets and philosophers for centuries. Leonard's poems seek a unifying spiritual connection outside the tenets of religion and politics. "In a Walled Garden" creates the illusion of this perfect space but the use of the adjective "walled" disappoints as its implied restriction defies even the possibility of the existence of such a garden. To reach the spiritual contentment/consciousness of the garden Leonard's poetry seeks, one must step beyond the walls of this Garden of Eden and conquer the temptations inherent in human nature itself, otherwise, one risks life being lived as, in Leonard's own words from "Memories of Childhood":

...experience without experience:
The life I lived then I live now.

Leonard shares an enjoyable experience with his readers through his wit and philosophy. Whether dipping indulgently into his text "here and there" or following the course of the poems of Jesus in Kashmir as one continuous stream, the experience reminds us why people still write poetry, and furthermore, why people still read it — the sheer joy of taking a rhythmic journey beyond the common language of communication.

Smith's journey through *The Fugitive Days* is much more simplistic, but no less meaningful. His voice whilst definitively masculine, authenticates areas of domesticity, art and history for his readers. He comfortably interprets the voice of "others," and it is this attribute which renders his historical section "Strife" the genuine article. The unquestionable genuinity of his "Hearth" section of poems lays in the prose poem "Devouring Life":

The Dad growls, ..."I'm gonna bite your tummy"... "Do more nip, nip," and the Mum, secured by their antics, says quietly, "Don't ever stop, Dad."

And from "Father Poem":

The only proof this happened
the flimsy life raft of memory.

And the heart of the book itself,
perhaps, "These Fugitive Days":

...our struggle to understand

The twisted strands of love.
And later we planned
Another day just like this,
Although we both know
It can't go on.

Smith accentuates the unspeakable moments of fusion within human relationships and gives them form. His strongest moments appear to surface in his prose poems with "Out of Touch," an excellent example :

His mother's eyes are defiant, the table a sheet of ice separating them. He left her iron touch at fourteen, and sometimes in his dreams she stares, waking him with a jolt...She laughs at death. His mother would give death a damned thrashing too.

How many readers have not had dreams of their mother's waking them with a jolt, and believe her to be invincible in the face of death? Ian Smith sees life and relationships as they really are and is able to express the experience in a poetic form which makes reading poetry a worthwhile experience and a pleasure.